Political audiobook scripts

30 practice scripts from VO Journey Academy. Free to record, free to use in your reel. Download the PDF to mark up in the booth, or print it straight from here.

Eighteen and a Half Minutes

US politics, Watergate · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

On June 20th, 1972 — three days after the Watergate break-in — Richard Nixon sat down with his chief of staff H.R. Haldeman and recorded a conversation that would have answered almost everything. We know this because we have the tape. What we don't have is eighteen and a half minutes of it. Rose Mary Woods, Nixon's personal secretary, claimed she accidentally erased the gap while transcribing — her foot on the pedal, her hand reaching for the phone. Forensic analysts later determined the erasure was made at least five separate times. The question was never really what Nixon said in those eighteen minutes. The question was always: what kind of man builds an entire presidency on the assumption that he can make things disappear?

The Tenth Ballot

US politics, conventions · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

By the end of the fourth ballot at the 1920 Republican convention, it was Friday night in Chicago and the candidates everyone had come to nominate — General Leonard Wood, Governor Frank Lowden — were both stalled, each man unable to break through the other's delegates. The party bosses retreated to suite 404 of the Blackstone Hotel, which is where the phrase "smoke-filled room" was born. They needed a name. Someone suggested Warren G. Harding — a man whose main qualification, as one senator put it, was that he looked like a president. They asked Harding directly whether there was anything in his past that could embarrass the party. He asked for ten minutes alone. He came back and said no. He was lying. The next day, on the tenth ballot, they nominated him anyway. He won in a landslide. He was dead less than three years later, before the scandals could finish him.

The Speech LBJ Didn't Give

US politics, Vietnam · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Lyndon Johnson thought about walking away long before he did. The speech he finally gave in March of 1968, telling the country he would not run again, had been circling him for years, since the first bad year in Vietnam, when he already knew, in some private room of himself, how it was going to end. Aides described him going down to the Situation Room in the middle of the night, in his robe, to read the casualty reports. He had grown up poor in the Texas Hill Country, had passed the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act and built more of a social safety net than any president since Roosevelt — and Vietnam was eating it all alive, and he knew it, and he couldn't stop. Power, it turns out, does not always come with the ability to use it.

Madam Secretary

US politics, portrait · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

When Madeleine Albright was confirmed as Secretary of State in January of 1997, she was fifty-nine years old, had fled the Nazis as a child, had fled the Communists as a young woman, had raised three daughters largely alone after her husband left her for someone younger, and had spent two decades clawing her way into rooms that were not built for her. She walked into the State Department on her first day and the employees lined the hallways applauding. She had one thought, she later said: don't cry. She didn't. She had spent a lifetime not crying in rooms that were waiting for her to. She had learned, somewhere along the way, that the composed face was its own form of power — and that nobody gives you a standing ovation for using it.

Black Saturday

World politics, Cold War · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

On October 27th, 1962 — what historians now call Black Saturday — an American U-2 spy plane was shot down over Cuba, its pilot killed. A second U-2 accidentally strayed into Soviet airspace over Alaska. An American destroyer was dropping depth charges on a Soviet submarine whose captain, cut off from Moscow and unsure whether the war had already begun, wanted to fire a nuclear torpedo. He needed two other officers to agree. One of them, Vasili Arkhipov, said no. Kennedy and Khrushchev are the names history remembers from that weekend. The name that actually matters is Arkhipov — a man almost nobody has heard of, who declined to end the world on a Saturday night.

The Senator's Bargain

US politics, portrait · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Hubert Humphrey had spent twenty years as the most passionate civil rights voice in the Democratic Party. He had delivered the speech at the 1948 convention that cracked the party open — "the time has arrived in America for the Democratic Party to get out of the shadow of states' rights and to walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights" — and when the vote on his civil rights plank went his way, part of the Southern delegations walked out of the hall. Twenty years later, as Lyndon Johnson's vice president, he supported a war he privately believed was unwinnable rather than break with the man who had given him his power. He lost the 1968 election to Nixon by less than one percent of the popular vote. He spent the rest of his life wondering whether honesty, earlier, might have changed the math.

Iron Lady, Rusted Parliament

UK politics, Thatcher · Mature (55+) · Neutral British · 1 minute

Margaret Thatcher was not removed by the Labour Party. She was removed by her own. On the morning of November 22nd, 1990, after eleven years as Prime Minister, after the Falklands and the miners' strike and the dismantling of industries that had defined entire communities for generations, her own Cabinet came to her one by one and told her she could not win. Geoffrey Howe had already resigned and delivered a parliamentary speech so precisely calibrated to wound her that the press called it an assassination in slow motion. She wept in the Cabinet room — privately, briefly. Then she went to the Commons and demolished the opposition in questions with such force that her own MPs, many of whom had just told her to go, sat there wondering what they had done.

The Confession That Wasn't

US politics, Watergate · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

On August 8th, 1974, Richard Nixon told the American people he was resigning the presidency. He did not apologize. He did not admit to obstruction of justice, to the hush money, to the enemies lists, to the IRS audits of political opponents, to any of it. He said he no longer had "a strong enough political base in Congress" to continue — as if the problem were arithmetic, not crime. He had spent two years telling the country he was not a crook. He left the White House the next morning, stood at the top of the steps of Marine One, and gave a double V-for-victory sign to the cameras with both hands. It was the most Richard Nixon thing Richard Nixon ever did. The man could not, even then, resist performing.

Mandela's Number

World politics, South Africa · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 1 minute

For eighteen of his twenty-seven years in prison, Nelson Mandela was Prisoner 466/64 — the 466th person incarcerated on Robben Island in 1964. In the prison's own records, he was a number. The calculation was straightforward: a name is a person, a person is a symbol, a symbol is a movement. A number is nothing. What the government did not anticipate — what authoritarian governments almost never anticipate — is that a man who spends eighteen years thinking clearly, in a small room, with nothing to do but refine his convictions, does not emerge diminished. He emerges clarified. The man who walked out of Victor Verster Prison on February 11th, 1990, was not the same man who had walked in. He was more precisely, more dangerously himself.

The Lobbyist's Lunch

US politics, corruption · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Jack Abramoff billed his clients — Native American tribes running casinos — eighty-five million dollars between 2001 and 2004. In return, he delivered them access to a Congress he had spent a decade systematically purchasing. He took lawmakers on golf trips to Scotland. He bought skyboxes. He hired their staffers. He funded think tanks that published research his clients needed to exist. None of this was hidden, exactly — it was just done in the language of Washington, which is a language designed to make corruption sound like constituent services. When it all came apart, Abramoff cooperated with prosecutors and named names. Twenty-one people were convicted or pled guilty. The reforms that followed lasted approximately one congressional cycle. Washington has a very efficient immune system.

All the President's Lawyers

US politics, Watergate · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

John Dean was thirty-four years old when he walked into the Oval Office on March 21st, 1973 and told the President of the United States that there was a cancer on the presidency. He had prepared what he was going to say. He had decided, in the days before, that the cover-up was going to collapse and he did not intend to be the last one holding it when it did. Nixon listened, asked questions, suggested options — including, on tape, a discussion of paying hush money — and then told Dean he'd done a good job. Dean went home and began cooperating with prosecutors. He would later spend five days in front of the Senate Watergate Committee, on live television, in such detailed and damning terms that the country stopped what it was doing to watch. He served four months. Nixon was gone seventeen months after that meeting.

The Night Chicago Burned

US politics, conventions · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

On the night of August 28th, 1968, while the Democratic Party was nominating Hubert Humphrey inside the International Amphitheatre, Chicago police were beating protesters with batons outside the Conrad Hilton on Michigan Avenue while television cameras broadcast it live to the entire country. Mayor Richard Daley had deployed nearly twelve thousand police officers, six thousand National Guardsmen, and seventy-five hundred Army troops for a convention in his own city. Inside, Senator Abraham Ribicoff looked down from the podium directly at Daley and said, "With George McGovern as President of the United States, we wouldn't have to have Gestapo tactics in the streets of Chicago." Daley stood up and screamed something at him — the lip-readers who reviewed the footage disagree on exactly what, but none of the options were parliamentary. The party did not recover for years. Some would say it has never entirely recovered.

The First Woman Who Almost Was

US politics, portrait · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Shirley Chisholm ran for president in 1972, twelve years before Geraldine Ferraro was nominated for vice president, forty-four years before Hillary Clinton won the popular vote and lost the Electoral College. She was a Black woman from Brooklyn who had already spent years being told — by Democrats, by the women's movement, by the civil rights establishment, by her own party — that her candidacy was inconvenient, poorly timed, a distraction. She ran anyway. She won 152 delegates. When she arrived at the convention, the McGovern campaign, which had used her delegate counts as a bargaining chip all year, dropped her the moment they had what they needed. "I have met far more discrimination as a woman than as a Black person," she said later. Nobody in either movement wanted to hear it. She said it anyway. That was, in the end, the whole of her political philosophy.

The Report and the Summary

US politics, investigation · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

The Mueller Report runs to four hundred and forty-eight pages. Before a single page of it was public, Attorney General William Barr sent Congress a four-page letter summarising what he called its principal conclusions. On obstruction of justice, the report itself was more careful than most of what was said about it: it declined to conclude that the President had committed a crime, and in the same passage declined to clear him. Mueller later wrote to Barr that the letter had not fully captured the context of the work. By the time the full report was released, much of the country had already decided what it said. This is a book about the distance between a document and its summary, and about who gets to fill that distance.

Two Minutes at the Berlin Wall

US politics, Cold War · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Reagan's speechwriters had put the line in. The State Department had taken it out. The National Security Council had taken it out again. The line — "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall" — was considered by the foreign policy establishment to be reckless, provocative, the kind of thing that could destabilize ongoing diplomatic progress. Reagan kept it. When the objections reached him one last time, on the ride into Berlin, he told his staff he thought they would leave it in. He gave the speech on June 12th, 1987. The State Department's objections are in the archives. The wall came down twenty-nine months later. Reagan was right and the experts were wrong, and it is worth sitting with the discomfort of that sentence for a moment before we move on.

The Architect

US politics, strategy · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Karl Rove had a theory. The theory was that the Republican Party, properly organized, could build a coalition so durable and so precisely targeted that it would dominate American politics for a generation — what he called the permanent majority. He was not wrong about the mechanics. The 2004 Bush re-election campaign's voter targeting operation was twenty years ahead of anything the Democrats were running. What Rove did not account for was Iraq. Not the war itself, but the specific, grinding, daily reality of a war that was not going the way the administration had promised it would go — and the particular political problem of asking people to keep believing something their eyes were telling them was false. The permanent majority lasted one more election. The theory, stripped of its hubris, became the operating manual for every campaign that followed.

Senator for Life

US politics, portrait · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 1 minute

Robert Byrd served in the United States Senate for fifty-one years — longer than any other senator in history. He had also, in his youth, recruited and organized a chapter of the Ku Klux Klan in West Virginia, a fact he spent the second half of his life describing as the greatest mistake he ever made. He said it many times, in many settings, with what appeared to be genuine anguish. Whether a man can fully reckon with a thing like that, whether the reckoning is ever complete, is a question this book cannot answer. What it can say is that the Senate is a place that rewards longevity above almost everything else, and that fifty-one years is long enough to be almost any kind of person you choose — and that Byrd, in choosing, chose better than he started.

The Day the Senate Stopped

US politics, impeachment · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

On February 12th, 1999, the United States Senate voted on two articles of impeachment against President Bill Clinton. The vote on perjury was 45 to convict, 55 to acquit. The vote on obstruction of justice was 50–50. Sixty-seven votes were required to remove him. No Democrat voted to convict on either article. The outcome had been known for weeks — the vote counts were not in doubt. And yet the chamber was absolutely silent when the clerk read the results, because a presidential impeachment trial, even a foregone one, forces the people in the room to understand something about the fragility of the whole arrangement. The Constitution works because people agree to let it work. That day, it held. Whether it held because of principle or because of politics is a question each senator answered differently, and privately, on the way home.

The Last Moderate

US politics, campaigns · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

John McCain lost the 2008 presidential election by nearly ten million votes. What is less remembered is what he did on the campaign trail in the final weeks — the moments when supporters at his own rallies called Barack Obama a terrorist, an Arab, a man not to be trusted, and McCain took the microphone back and said, no. "He's a decent family man and citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues." The crowd booed him. His own crowd. Booed him for being decent. He kept doing it. Political scientists still argue about whether it cost him votes or whether the race was already over. What is not arguable is that he knew it might cost him votes and he did it anyway, and that this is now a remarkable enough act in American political life to be worth writing a chapter about.

Forty-Four

US politics, portrait · Adult (40-55) · Neutral American · 1 minute

On January 20th, 2009, Barack Obama placed his hand on the same Bible Abraham Lincoln had used and took the oath of office in front of the largest crowd ever assembled on the National Mall. John Lewis was there — the man who had been beaten on the Edmund Pettus Bridge forty-four years earlier for attempting to vote. Obama's grandmother had died two days before the election; she did not see it. His father's father had been a cook for the British in Kenya. There is a kind of history that moves slowly enough that you can't feel it moving, and then a day arrives that makes visible how far it has traveled. What happens after those days — the hard, administrative, compromised, unglamorous work of governing — is what this book is actually about. But you have to stand in that morning first, and understand what it meant, before any of the rest of it makes sense.

The Name on the Shard

Ancient and medieval, Athens · Mature (55+) · Neutral British · 1 minute

In Athens, in the early fifth century BC, the citizens could vote to send a man away. They called it ostracism, after the ostrakon, the broken piece of pottery on which each voter scratched a name. If enough votes were cast, the man named most often had ten days to leave the city, for ten years. No trial. No charge. He kept his property. He simply stopped being there.

Plutarch tells a story about the vote of 482 BC. A countryman who could not write, not recognising the man standing next to him, handed his shard to Aristides, the statesman all of Athens called the Just, and asked him to write a name on it. Which name? Aristides.

Had Aristides ever done him any wrong? No. He did not even know the man. He was just tired of hearing him called the Just.

Aristides wrote his own name on the shard and handed it back.

What the Barons Got

Ancient and medieval, Magna Carta · Adult (40-55) · Neutral British · 90 seconds

On the fifteenth of June, 1215, in a meadow beside the Thames called Runnymede, King John of England put his seal to a document he had no intention of keeping.

The legend has grown larger than the meadow. John did not sign anything. Kings did not sign; they sealed. And he had not been converted to the cause of liberty. He had been cornered, by rebel barons who had taken London and wanted their grievances settled: taxes, inheritances, the fines a king could charge a widow who did not wish to remarry.

Most of the charter deals with exactly that kind of thing. Fish weirs on the Thames. The return of hostages.

And the peace it bought lasted barely three months. By the end of the summer, the Pope, at John's own request, had declared the charter void, and England was at war with itself.

What saved it was John's death, in October 1216. The men governing for his nine-year-old son reissued the charter to win the barons back, and then reissued it again, and again, until a bargain made under duress became a habit, and the habit became law.

One clause says that no free man shall be imprisoned, or stripped of his rights, except by the lawful judgement of his peers or by the law of the land. Eight hundred years later, it is still on the statute book.

The Rising Sun in Philadelphia

US politics, founding · Mature (55+) · Neutral American · 1 minute

For four months in the summer of 1787, fifty-five delegates met in the State House in Philadelphia, and agreed that nothing said in the room would leave it. There were sentries at the doors. There was no press. Members were bound by a rule not to repeat what they heard.

George Washington presided from a high-backed chair with a half sun carved into its top rail. Benjamin Franklin, eighty-one years old, often had his speeches read for him by a colleague.

On the last day, the seventeenth of September, as the final delegates were coming forward to sign, Franklin remarked to the men near him that he had spent the whole summer looking at that sun, unable to tell whether it was rising or setting.

Now, he said, he knew. It was rising.

Thirty-nine men signed. Three who were present refused. The argument about what they had made began that same afternoon, and it has never stopped.

Peterloo

UK politics, reform · Adult (30-45) · Neutral British (light Northern English welcome) · 1 minute

On the sixteenth of August, 1819, tens of thousands of people walked into Manchester from the mill towns around it. They came in their Sunday best. Some contingents had practised marching in step, so that no one could call them a rabble. Whole families came, carrying banners that asked for the vote.

At the time, Manchester, one of the great industrial towns of the world, did not have a single member of Parliament.

They gathered on St Peter's Field to hear the radical speaker Henry Hunt. The magistrates, watching from a house on the edge of the field, ordered his arrest, and sent in the local yeomanry, part-time cavalry, to make it. They rode in with sabres drawn. Regular hussars followed.

Within minutes the field was cleared. Around eighteen people died. Hundreds were injured.

A local paper gave the day its name, a bitter joke about Waterloo, four years earlier.

Peterloo.

Two Hundred and Seventy Metres of Names

World politics, suffrage · Adult (30-45) · New Zealand or Australian (light) · 1 minute

In 1893, New Zealand became the first self-governing country in the world to give women the vote in parliamentary elections.

They won it on paper first. Led by Kate Sheppard and the Women's Christian Temperance Union, campaigners went door to door, through towns and farms and Māori communities, collecting signatures. Nearly thirty-two thousand women signed petitions that year. The sheets of the biggest one were glued end to end and wound around a pole, and when it was presented to Parliament, it was unrolled down the floor of the chamber: two hundred and seventy metres of names.

It was not a sure thing. The bill scraped through the upper house by two votes, after two members who had opposed it changed their minds.

On the nineteenth of September, the Governor signed it into law. Ten weeks later, women voted in a general election for the first time.

They still could not stand for Parliament. That took another twenty-six years.

The Walk to Dandi

World politics, independence · Adult (40-55) · Indian English (light) or Neutral British · 90 seconds

On the morning of the twelfth of March, 1930, a sixty-year-old man set out on foot from his ashram near Ahmedabad, with seventy-eight followers and a walking stick. His destination was the sea, about two hundred and forty miles away. His target was salt.

Under British rule, making or selling salt outside the government monopoly was forbidden, and salt was taxed. The tax fell on everyone, however poor, because everyone needs salt. That was precisely why Mohandas Gandhi chose it. Some in his own movement thought salt was far too small an issue to hang a national campaign on. He thought it was exactly the right size: something every villager understood without a pamphlet.

He did not hide his plans. He wrote to the Viceroy in advance. The walk took twenty-four days, and every day the crowds along the road grew larger, and every day the newspapers followed.

On the sixth of April, on the shore at the coastal village of Dandi, he bent down and picked up a lump of salty mud.

It was, in law, a crime.

Within months, tens of thousands of Indians had been arrested for breaking the salt laws, Gandhi among them. Independence was still seventeen years away. But the march had shown the world that an empire could be put on the defensive by a man with a walking stick.

Thirty-Nine Women

World politics, suffrage · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 45 seconds

On the tenth of April, 1946, less than a year after the end of the war, Japan held a general election under new rules. For the first time, women could vote. For the first time, women could stand.

About two in three eligible women turned out. And when the count was finished, thirty-nine women had been elected to the House of Representatives.

It was a remarkable number for a first attempt. It was also a number that would not be beaten for almost sixty years.

Winning a right, it turns out, is one campaign. Using it is another, and it lasts a good deal longer.

The Eleventh of November

World politics, constitutional crisis · Mature (55+) · Australian · 90 seconds

Remembrance Day, 1975. At around one o'clock in the afternoon, the Prime Minister of Australia, Gough Whitlam, arrived at Government House in Canberra, expecting to discuss the crisis that had stalled Parliament for almost a month. The Senate, controlled by the opposition, had refused to pass the bills that paid for government. Whitlam meant to call an election for half the Senate.

He never got to raise it. The Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, whom Whitlam himself had recommended for the post, handed him a letter. His commission was withdrawn. He was dismissed.

Within the hour, Kerr had appointed the Leader of the Opposition, Malcolm Fraser, as caretaker Prime Minister, on condition that he secure the money bills and go straight to an election.

That afternoon, on the steps of Parliament House, the Governor-General's secretary read the proclamation dissolving Parliament, ending, as proclamations did, with God save the Queen. Whitlam stepped up to the microphones. Well may we say God save the Queen, he told the crowd, because nothing will save the Governor-General.

A month later, the voters returned Fraser with a landslide.

And the two rivals? Decades on, they found themselves on the same side, both campaigning for an Australian republic.

Fifteen Minutes a Night

World politics, referendum · Adult (25-40) · Neutral American · 1 minute

In 1988, after fifteen years of military rule, Chile held a plebiscite. Should General Augusto Pinochet stay in power for another eight years? Yes, or No.

The government expected to win. It controlled the state, the army and most of the airwaves. But the rules gave each side fifteen minutes of television a night in the final weeks, and the opposition, a coalition of parties that had spent years quarrelling with one another, had to decide what to do with them.

Against the instincts of many of their own supporters, they chose not to lead with anger. They led with a rainbow. A cheerful jingle. Ordinary people laughing and looking forward. The message was that joy was on its way.

On the fifth of October, more than nine in ten registered voters turned out. No won, with about fifty-six percent.

Pinochet left the presidency in March 1990. He stayed on as commander of the army for another eight years.

Hand in Hand

World politics, protest · Young adult (18-25) · Neutral British · 1 minute

On the evening of the twenty-third of August, 1989, at seven o'clock, around two million people in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania walked to the side of the road and held hands.

The line ran for more than six hundred kilometres, from Tallinn, through Riga, to Vilnius. It had been organised in a matter of weeks, without mobile phones, by the independence movements of the three republics, with radio stations helping to guide people to the gaps in the chain.

The date was chosen with care. Fifty years earlier to the day, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union had signed a pact with a secret protocol that divided Eastern Europe between them. The Baltic states were annexed soon afterwards. For decades, Moscow denied that the protocol existed at all.

The chain lasted about fifteen minutes. That December, the Soviet parliament formally condemned the protocol. Within about two years, all three countries were independent.

Practice with these, record them, post them as demos or reels, use them in auditions. Please do not resell them as scripts. © VO Journey Academy · avosjourney.com